

Gurnet Light move stalled

By John O'Keefe
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PLYMOUTH — The Coast Guard's plan to move Gurnet Light away from an eroding seaside cliff has been stalled by residents who say it would ruin the neighborhood they've tried so hard to protect.

The neighbors are worried that large trucks and equipment needed to move the beacon back about 200 feet would damage Gurnet Point's roads and jeopardize its ecosystem.

"There's no way they could get all that equipment out here without widening the roads," said Anthony Cardinale, a Belmont resident who

owns a summer home next to the lighthouse. "It would destroy the neighborhood."

Cardinale said he was particularly concerned about roadside marshes along the peninsula, which juts into Plymouth and Duxbury bays.

Gurnet Light, the oldest wooden lighthouse in the country, is about 50 feet away from the edge of a 45-foot coastal bluff. Wind and rain are eroding the cliff several feet every year. The Coast Guard has proposed moving the lighthouse.

The project was scheduled to go out to bid last week, and the move was supposed to be completed before winter, said Lt. John Lang, a spokesman for the Coast Guard's civil engineering unit. But the project was put on hold after residents protested the proposal at a conservation commission hearing last month.

The conservation commission must approve the move because the lighthouse is within 100 feet of the shoreline, a protected area under the state Wetlands Protection Act.

The neighbors say they just want the Coast Guard to consider other options.

"They haven't got any plans for stopping the erosion," said Elaine Nudd, who has lived on the Gurnet

year-round for 18 years. "If we just get together and talk, maybe we can come up with a plan that's better for everyone."

Cardinale agreed there's room for compromise.

"They came up with a drastic proposal without any input from the neighbors," Cardinale said. "The lighthouse would literally be in my front yard."

Both parties will return to the conservation commission Monday to try to resolve their differences.

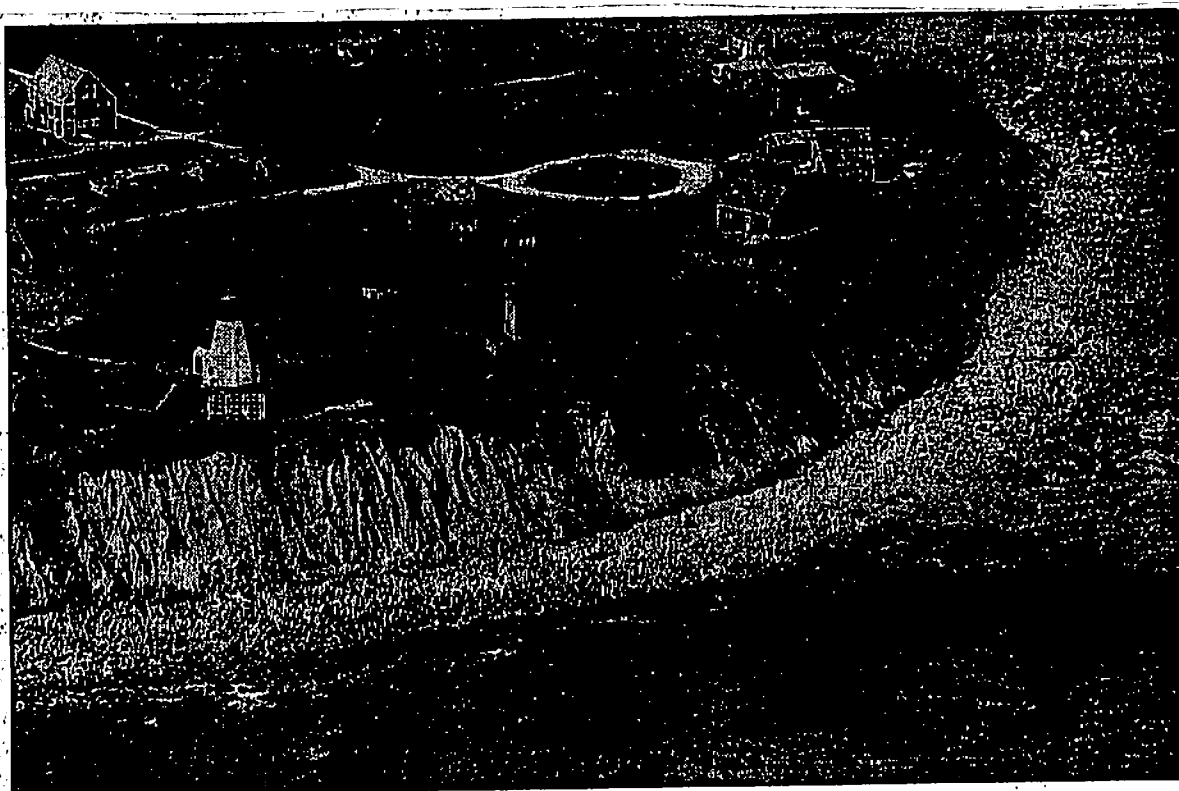
Conservation commission Chairman Michael Mason said he wasn't sure what the board would decide. He said a vote could not be delayed further without the Coast Guard's consent.

Mason said the proposal could be denied only because of environmental impacts, not for aesthetic reasons.

Lang said Coast Guard officials hadn't anticipated resistance from neighbors, but he indicated that the Coast Guard might be willing to compromise.

"The hope is that we get the approval this Monday," he said. "But that doesn't mean we're going to necessarily force the issue this fall."

Neighbors have suggested reveg-



File photo

Gurnet Light, the oldest wooden lighthouse in the country, is about 50 feet away from the edge of a 45-foot cliff.

etating the bluff to slow the erosion.

"They should be concerned with preserving the cliff," Cardinale said. "It would be a lot cheaper than what they're proposing."

The cost of moving the lighthouse has not been determined, because the bid process has been delayed, Lang said.

He would not comment on the alternatives neighbors have proposed and said the Coast Guard would not make any decisions until after Monday's meeting.

The lighthouse was built in 1843 within Fort Andrew, a garrison that was used by Colonial troops during the Revolutionary War. It replaced twin lighthouses that were

destroyed by fire in 1801. The foundation of one of the original lighthouses is still there.

Opponents of the project also are concerned that the Coast Guard proposal would block the entrance to the fort. Some have suggested moving the lighthouse to the old foundation, about 30 feet inland.

"If they were to move it back 30 feet it could probably last another 100 years," Cardinale said.

At least one Gurnet resident, however, supports the Coast Guard's proposal.

"I feel they should do what they think is best for the lighthouse," said Martha Keenan, who has lived across the road from Gurnet Light

for 40 years.

Nudd is also worried about delaying the move too long.

"I just don't want (the neighborhood) to object to the point that we lose the lighthouse over the cliff," she said.

If the conservation commission approves the plan next week, there still would be enough time to finish the job this fall. Even so, Lang said, the move may be delayed until the spring.

The 43-foot-tall beacon probably isn't in immediate danger, he said.

"We've probably got two or three years until it reaches the critical point," he said. "But it's tough to tell what a big nor'easter would do."

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